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HE GAVE THE VERY SHIRT OFF HIS BACK.

Here Is the True Story of a Humble Man Who Died the Other Day and Whom Three Thousand Persons Followed to the Grave.

Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my children, ye have done it unto me.
Matthew, xxv., 40.

"His Life Was a Constant Exemplification of the Very Highest Principles of Christianity."

"They Will Tell You by the Hour of the Good Deeds of the Old Man."

DID you read in the newspapers the other day that Rabbi Levison, of Williamsburg, was dead, and that three thousand men, women and children followed his coffin to the grave? It was only a brief notice, and perhaps it escaped your eye. The past week was exceedingly lively with news—war, calamities, legislation, prize fights and all that—and the death of a penniless Jewish rabbi was not likely to create much of a sensation.

Rabbi Levison died last week, and three thousand men, women and children followed his coffin to the grave.

And when they had laid him to rest the preacher cried:

"Woe unto Israel! Jehovah has taken a saint from among us! Blessed is the name of Jehovah!"

You know not who this man was because he was humble. Never mind whether you are a Christian or a Jew, you must admire the memory of this man. Born of a wealthy family, he might, had he so willed it, have achieved fame and distinction, for he came of a race of students. But more than half a century ago he buried all worldliness and consecrated his life to the alleviation of suffering.

The story of these fifty years of self-abnegation, of sacrifice and of devotion to a sublime cause, will never be told. He was a devout Jew, and, as such, refused to accept Christ as the Messiah of Israel. Yet day after day and year after year his life was a constant exemplification of the very highest and noblest principles of Christianity, and as you read of his deeds you feel the spirit of that wonderful sermon upon which the Church of the Saviour rests.

Rabbi Levison was born in Wilna, Russia, in 1814. He came of a famous family of students and preachers. They were possessed of wealth, and for generations back all the members of the family had boasted of their high education and great learning. The rabbi's father and grandfather were savans. He himself was a proficient Hebrew scholar at ten. When he came of age he spoke most of the modern languages, and in his twenty-second year he wrote a religious work in Hebrew that attracted attention not alone in Russia, but in London and Paris. He married early and entered the Jewish ministry.

Soon he became as famous for his preaching as for his writing. The snug fortune left him by his father enabled him to travel, and for nearly a quarter of a century he roamed over Europe, Asia and Africa. Everywhere he lived a pure, simple life. His wants were few and easily satisfied. What remained of his income after supplying his needs he distributed among the worthy poor whom he met on his travels. Neither race nor creed made any difference to him. He was a devout orthodox Hebrew, but in his giving he belonged to all nationalities. Jew, Christian, or infidel, Turk or pagan, if they needed help, were alike welcome to his purse, and this rule he maintained to the time of his death.

That a man would give the shirt off his back is a common enough phrase, but, so far as the world generally is concerned, it is simply a phrase. With Rabbi Levison it was once an actuality. The incident occurred only a few years ago, on the East Side of this city, where he lived for more than a quarter of a century. He was returning one bitter afternoon from the synagogue in Rivington street, where he officiated, when he was met by a poor, shivering wretch, who asked him in the name of God for money to buy a loaf of bread.

"Certainly, certainly," vehemently exclaimed the old gentleman, diving down into his pocket. He felt first in his waistcoat pockets, then in his trousers and in the tails of the old but neat Prince Albert coat he always wore. But the search was in vain. The good rabbi was as poor as the mendicant himself. An expression of intense pain crossed his face as he halted and stammered:

"Are you very hungry?"

"Oh, so hungry! I have eaten nothing for two days."

"My poor man! And here I have not a single farthing. What shall I do?"

The suppliant, whose face had lighted with joyful hope, was cast down into the depths of despair. But he knew the rabbi would have helped him if he could, and, murmuring his thanks, he started to move away.

"But you are hungry: what will you do?" asked the rabbi, anxiously, still fumbling in his pockets in the vain hope that soon he might find a coin.

"Starve," said the other, with a sickly smile.

"No, no, you shall not starve. Here, come with me."

The old man led the way into a dark hall and there began to take off his coat. The mendicant looked on in amazement.

"What would you do here?"

"Give you my shirt. I can get others. You can take it and sell it or pawn it. It will give you enough to buy bread. Then come and see me to-morrow and I will have money to give you."

Despairing and hungry as he was, the mendicant was still so touched by such unexampled generosity that he protested against the sacrifice.

"It is cold weather and you will need your shirt. You will get sick."

"Not I, my friend," laughed the old gentleman, as he struggled out of the garment in the shadow of the hallway. "I have often gone without a shirt, and see, I have a fine warm coat. I will never miss it, and for you it will mean bread."

Saying this he pressed the shirt into the hesitating man's hands, slipped on his coat again, and was away before the other could say another word.

This is no mere fancy sketch, but an actual incident in Rabbi Levison's life, an incident that was repeated many and many a time in slightly different forms. Over in the ghetto of the East Side or in Williamsburg, where he lived toward the last, they will tell you dozens of such stories of almost incomprehensible self-sacrifice. The man who got the shirt in this case was Isaac Abraham, now at steady employment as a tailor.

"That shirt," Abraham declares, "not alone saved me from starvation, but my wife and little ones as well. I pawned it for twenty cents, with which I bought bread. Good luck seemed to come with the rabbi's gift, for the very next day I found employment. Rest assured that the first thing I did was to get that shirt back and return it to him who had so generously taken it off his back to give me."

The rabbi came to this country thirty years ago, shortly after the close of the civil war. He was then of an age when most men have settled down to enjoy the competence they have amassed, but with him it was the beginning of a new line of work.

His wife had died a year before, leaving him with no other family connection, except his son, who had gone into mercantile pursuits at Odessa. He had travelled and preached all over the old world, and determined to come to the new one. In Paris he had perfected himself in philology, paying special attention to Arabic in order to prosecute to the best advantages of his Biblical researches.

He issued final editions of several of his works, and with the proceeds embarked for America. What remained of his private fortune he first distributed among the needy in the town where he lived. He landed here with little more than enough to assure him food and lodging for a short time. It was all he wanted. He never had any fear of the future.

"The Lord will provide," was his favorite saying when his friends beseeched him to be more prudent for fear that he might come to want and suffer.

It was his motto at all times. He was always willing to share and to give the last he had to those who needed it. If he had nothing to eat himself he simply went without.

And it was not infrequently the case that he was compelled to do so. Large sums were annually placed in his hands by friends and admirers in this city, in Boston, in Philadelphia, Chicago, and other places, for distribution. Over and over again it was discovered that not alone had he distributed all these sums, but his own scanty income as well. Therefore toward the last, to make sure that the old gentleman should not want, the people in the neighborhood made it a rule to bring him food as well as money. He lived for the last three years in two scantily furnished rooms all by himself at No. 119 Selgel street, Williamsburg, the heart of the ghetto quarter, on the other side of the river. Every man, woman and child in the thickly populated neighborhood knew him. His venerable figure was as familiar a sight as the street signs themselves, and never a person passed him who did not give a reverential greeting. In return he would bestow his blessing, always devoutly accepted.

He was a short, rather broad-shouldered man, under the medium height. His face was superb in its patriarchal dignity. A thick beard of medium length always well looked after, snow white with age, framed the lower part of his countenance. His hair, also snow white, was thick and bushy about the temples, but on top it had thinned out, lengthening his already magnificent forehead. When preaching and in the house he generally wore a close-fitting skull cap. On the street he was never seen without an old-fashioned silk hat, black Prince Albert coat and dark trousers.

In New York in the lower East Side he was as well-known as in Williamsburg; better, if anything, for he had lived in the neighborhood of Rivington street for twenty-six years. He finally moved across the river because of the wider field he had in that section where synagogues and rabbies are not as plentiful as they are in New York.

In later years he was never regularly connected with any one synagogue. He would preach here and there, and was always welcome to any pulpit he chose to honor. He put aside regular pastoral work because he felt that he could be of more use to his people by devoting himself as nearly as possible to looking after their immediate needs. He devoted practically his entire time to collecting funds from the well-to-do members of his race for use among the poor. For his own need he found money by literary work done during his "idle hours."

He delighted particularly in helping the young girls whom he knew to find husbands worthy of them. Here he always gave a helping hand in providing furniture and other necessities for housekeeping. Was there a husband out of work and in need of assistance, the rabbi would hunt him up, help him to find employment and see to it that he and his family did not suffer until work was found. When a new baby was expected in a household where there were already more than enough mouths to feed, the rabbi lightened the burden by sending of his own stores and getting others to send of their stores.

"And with him," said the Rabbi Rosenberg when preaching the funeral sermon last Saturday, "the old saying, 'let not thy right hand know what thy left is doing,' found close application. He helped, helped, helped, but no one ever knew whom he helped. No one was ever pauperized, no one humiliated by accepting his gifts. God has made few men since the beginning of the world in so noble a mould."

They will tell you by the hour of the deeds of the good old man if you go to the Rabbi Rosenberg's little synagogue on the top floor of the tenement No. 46 Moore street, Williamsburg. The Rabbi Rosenberg is himself an old man and known for his good works, but beside him who has gone he considers himself a veritable apprentice.

"No one will ever know," he says, "what an amount of good he did. He himself would never talk about it, except when he came to ask aid for some deserving case. Then those who had gave freely."

Almost up to the last the venerable old man was hale and hearty. He visited his friends regularly, and continued his charitable labors. He died as he would have liked, without suffering and without lingering. He was to have performed a wedding ceremony a week ago last Friday. Always the perfection of promptness, the fact that he could not meet his engagements caused general alarm.

"The good rabbi must be sick," said every one.

So they went in a body to the house, and there they found him dead in bed. He had been carried off by an attack of heart failure, due principally to advancing years.

Tenderly he was prepared by loving hands for the last journey. From every section came men and women anxious to do what they could that they might show their love and respect for the dead.

Funeral services were held in the Synagogue Beth Hamedrash Hagodal, on Moore street. Rabbi Rosenberg and Dr. Moses Wechsler delivered addresses setting forth the facts of the noble life Rabbi Levison had led.

Never in the history of the Williamsburg ghetto has such a congregation been seen. The synagogue was crowded to the doors. Few eyes remained dry. Even the men, undemonstrative though they usually are, were not ashamed to cry over the loss of so good a friend.

After the service the body was escorted by practically the entire population of the Hebrew section of Williamsburg and a tremendous delegation from this side of the river.

The Guard of Honor was composed of nearly one hundred children, scholars at the Hebrew free school of Talmud Thorah. The old rabbi had at one time been a teacher in this school. The children chanted prayers as they marched. The other mourners stretched for blocks and blocks, walking in procession behind the coffin. It was an imposing cortege.

Most of the men followed the body to the grave in Union Fields Cemetery. The women and children, after going part of the way, returned to their homes. They spent the time until the return of the men from the burial in telling of the good works of the rabbi. Nearly every one had a story to tell illustrative of his big heartedness. It will be many a long month before they cease to speak daily of the old man.

At the Moore street synagogue services were held every night last week. After the services the members of the congregation spent an hour or two talking of their old friend before dispersing for home.

Rabbi Levison had lived eighty-three years. He earned during that time more money than comes to the average person. He was frugal to the extreme of abstemiousness. Yet when he died his sole earthly possessions consisted of $50. Of this $28 was spent in placing him under ground in the simple way he would have desired. The remaining $22—the sole legacy of four-score years of labor—has been sent to his grandchild in far-off Russia.

But if he passed away unknown to the world at large, he was honored by his people in a way that no man has been honored in this community since the time when General Grant was carried to his last resting place under the escort of a weeping multitude. Among the thousands that accompanied his remains to the grave was a small army of solemn-faced children. The Rabbi Levison, while loving all people, had a particularly tender spot for the young. In return, they loved him devotedly. They marched behind the simple pine coffin, weeping for a friend who had shown by his works that he understood them. They laid the tribute of countless tears on his grave.

Nowhere except in this great bustling city, where every man is busy with his own interests, could a citizen of such pure uprightness and unselfishness have escaped notice. Had he worked his charities in a small community as he worked them with us, a towering marble shaft would mark his resting place. As it is, he has a monument in the hearts of those who knew him that will remain while life lasts.

A FAUST RELIC GONE.

Birthplace of the Famous Conjurer Sold for Old Junk.

The house in Roda, Saxe-Altenburg, where Dr. Johann Faust, the famous magician and soothsayer of legendary fame, was born toward the last quarter of the fifteenth century, was knocked down to a native junk dealer for $25 the other day, and is now being dismantled. Five years ago, when the Chicago World's Fair Commission dispatched a small army of curiosity hunters to all parts of the globe to seek attractions and freaks, the good people of Roda asked a cool hundred thousand dollars for the little pile of brick, wood, iron, mortar and dust that was to be taken down and re-erected in the Windy City. But the price was considered too stiff even for those squandering days, and the negotiations fell through. In order that the house might not fall down the municipal fathers of the little town ordered its immediate demolition.

This historic structure stands, or stood until quite recently, on a rocky eminence near the Jenalsches Thor (city gate). It is a frame building, very rickety, and has been extensively repaired. There is a legend that it dates back to the year 1450 or 1460, as do many other buildings of Roda. That Faust saw the light in one of its dingy rooms, with floors of trampled earth and tiny windows in leaden frames, is attested by several authentic statements in the town chronicle, and also in the Faust Buch, printed in 1587, from which all later writers on the Faust legend quote, and which is their chief authority.